

KILL SADDAM: Deadly plot is preferred to invasion

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PRESIDENT George Bush has ordered secret agents to prepare to assassinate Saddam Hussein.

Pentagon sources have revealed the "Target Saddam" scheme has moved up the political and military agenda in Washington amid growing unease about the wisdom of war plans.

Faced with a backlash abroad and an open battle between doves and hawks in his own administration, Bush has demanded planners offer him real alternatives.

Pentagon sources have told the Sunday Mirror that he has now ordered millions of dollars to be funneled into encouraging an opposition coup or staging a dramatic assassination.

CIA agents are under orders to infiltrate deep inside Iraq. They are also likely to call on the expertise of Britain's SAS commandos for the covert plans.

One Pentagon source said: "The military and Colin Powell (Bush's Secretary of State) do not want to go to war anyway.

"We are now redoubling our efforts to either assassinate Saddam or set up a coup. A massive amount of money is being spent on trying to arrange an assassination.

Bush's view is 'let the Devil take the hindmost'. The UN will shout and scream but the American public will say 'George got him'."

Yesterday the campaign switch was hinted at for the first time in public by the US Under-Secretary for Arms Control, John Bolton.

He said that the removal of Saddam remains a priority for the White House. But he insisted that did not necessarily mean military action.

"The point is that the threat from Saddam to peace and security at large means that regime change is the only way to eliminate that threat," said Mr Bolton.

"There are all kinds of ways for regime change to take place."

The determination of President Bush to push ahead with the removal of Saddam from office came in spite of the first offer from Iraq to allow UN weapons inspectors back into the country.

The UN will meet this week to consider the Iraqi offer, but British officials yesterday expressed deep skepticism, saying that Saddam had a history of "playing games" and failing to deliver on promises.

Mr Bolton said: "Let there be no mistake. While we insist on the reintroduction of the weapons inspectors, our policy insists on regime change in Baghdad. That policy will not be altered whether the inspectors go in or not."

The move to scale down military expectations follows a backlash abroad and squabbles at home for Bush.

He originally planned a "Son of Desert Storm" invasion using 250,000 troops and a vast air attack on Baghdad. Then last week leaked reports out of Washington suggested an "inside-out" solution. A much smaller force would swoop on Baghdad and key centres.

But now Pentagon sources say that Bush is less convinced of the likely success of an invasion.

Last week his plans were set back on several fronts. Firstly, aides to Tony Blair suggested Bush needs a fresh United Nations mandate from the Security Council before mounting any attempt to topple Saddam. Then the President was frustrated by the reaction of previous loyal Allies in the region, particularly King Abdullah of Jordan, who told him that his country was not available as a US base for an attack on Saddam.

According to Washington officials, Bush is feeling increasingly cornered. His preferred window for a military campaign has always been next spring - echoing the timing of his father's Desert Storm campaign of 1991.

To go sooner runs the risk of the military machine being ill-prepared - later and the spectre of his re-election campaign, which spans 12 months up to November 2004, would cloud the military judgement of a campaign.

Another previously uncalculated factor is the economic cost to the US at a time when corporate scandals and stock market plunges are threatening to push America into its second recession in two years.